An Interview with

Mary Jackson

December 20, 1978

Interviewed by

Rebecca Ann Harris

MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY
Post Office Box 571
Jackson., Mississippi 39205

AU 039
OH 1979.07.06
MHSOHP2-8

Interviewee: Jackson, Mary
Interviewer: Harris, Rebecca Ann

Title: An interview with Mary Jackson, December 20, 1978 / interviewed by Rebecca Ann Harris

Collection Title: Murrah High School Advanced History Class Oral History Project, Politics and Integration

Scope Note: Murrah High School students, with assistance from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, conducted oral history interviews with local citizens about local politics and the Jackson Public Schools integration. The interviews were conducted during the 1978-1979 school year.

This collection was selected to be digitally remastered through the National Endowment for the Humanities Civil Rights Era Recordings Grant in 2004.

HARRIS: Today is December 20th and I'm interviewing Mrs. Mary Jackson, a teacher at Murrah High School. Mrs. Jackson, would you please give me a brief summary of your background?

JACKSON: I was born and raised in Jackson. I went to Episcopal schools until the last two years of high schooling, and I went to Jim Hill High School then. I got my B. S. degree from Jackson State University, my master's degree in mathematics from Marquette University in Wisconsin, and I've been teaching – I've had two teaching jobs, one at Lanier from 1960 to 1970, and then [inaudible].

HARRIS: Okay. Do you think integration has achieved its purpose?

JACKSON: Not completely. I think it's just like most things these days. We're still trying. I think the situation is much better now that it's ever been. I think we've surprised, here in the South, an awful lot of people, because they did not expect us to do it with all the really, you know, the violence and the really big hassles we had at the beginning. I don't think anybody expected us to reach the point where we are now. Things are not good, but they are a lot better than most of us would ever have expected them to be and they are good enough so that there's hope – that we hope that they're going to get even better and that we will just learn to accept each other and work with each other without thinking about race in particular.

HARRIS: How did the students react to integration?

JACKSON: They were just like the rest of us – scared to death. There was resentment. There was fear, which is normal, I think, because most people are afraid to go into new situations – things that they have never experienced before, and in this case, things that they've heard so many adverse things about so that they came not knowing exactly what to expect, I think because in an awful lot of situations and an awful lot of schools, when they got to the schools, they accepted most situations. They were accepted so much better than they expected. I think people who were already at the schools tried, probably more hard than we expected, to make the transition as good for us as they possibly could.

There were some bad situations. There were some incidents – incidences. But, I think overall, when we got into the situations because it was not as bad as some of us had expected, it was a pleasant surprise. And so we did better and we started to work towards it. As I said, we had a lot of adverse things happening in the beginning, but they, too, started to settle down. The problems we have now are of an entirely different nature than we had before. An awful lot of our problems are not racial at all. Most of them, I think, now are not racial at all. We've had a lot of changes occur in society and so that reflected in our schools. But, they are not so predominantly

racial as they were back then, so I think probably it worked out pretty well from the beginning.

HARRIS: How did the teachers feel about integration?

JACKSON: The same way – scared to death. But, I feel like, speaking just for [inaudible], after what happened to us here, that the teachers – the white teachers who were already here – made an effort to make it comfortable for us here. To accept us, you know, it was not an overt thing. Everybody just loved everybody all of a sudden. But, knowing that all of us were in the same situation, I think they tried to make it as pleasant as possible. I think the administration helped considerably beyond that. And so, it wasn't – even as afraid as we were of the situation, as fearful of – of all that we did not know about it, I think because they were willing to work so hard and because we were willing to try to work, you know, with whatever we encountered around that it – it really worked out pretty well.

HARRIS: Were the students as willing to learn after integration as before?

JACKSON: I think. I'm not sure that I can say, you know, I can just make a definite statement they were not as willing to learn. I think it was – they were involved with so many other things then – right then. There was a big problem with adjustment to a new situation. There was still so much distress, you know, a black child in a white teacher's class – distressful. A white child in a black teacher's class – distressful. All the things you've heard about black teachers being incompetent or white teachers being racist made it really hard, and so the concentration wasn't on learning. I think in the situations where the classroom was – where the teachers were good enough – that's a bad choice of words maybe – but, good enough to really get in there were – get their classroom settled down, that the kids were willing to settle down and try to learn.

I think the fact that – I'm of the opinion now that the kids are not as willing to learn is not so much because of – of integration; it's because of all matter of changes we've had in society is general – in general. I think that over a period of the last few years, so much has changed in society, specifically outside the school, that it had to affect us in here, and that the, you know, the educators were concerned, scores are down, achievements tests – standardized tests and so forth. But, without students, that's not where the emphasis is. So, it's not specifically, I think, a result of integration. I think it's a result of other changes in society.

HARRIS: How do you feel about individualized learning?

JACKSON: I think that's probably a good thing, but I think it has not worked up to this point. In most of the situations I know about or have read about, unless you

can count those few incidences where somebody – well, first of all on helping our students to learn self-motivation, to learn self-control, because with that kind of situation, a student is pretty much left on his own. I am not as much in favor of it as I guess I would be because, you know, the learning itself – the working itself is okay, except I think you always need interaction between students and teachers. And with individual learning, you tend to go to packets and machines, and it's so impersonal that I think the students just don't learn well from it, you know. It looks good on paper, but in actual practice, I think, in very few instances, it hasn't succeeded

HARRIS: What do you think the problem was at the Powell School System?

JACKSON: Probably just that they – just need to [inaudible] have these very small children who had teachers who were in the beginning who were all learning, just as their students were, and perhaps they didn't realize that just, you know, the business of going from packet-to-packet and machine-to-machine, while it may have been fun, that the kids, you know, from time-to-time, there were things they were doing that were really fun, [inaudible]. And I think right now, it's just a matter of fact that our students expect somebody to say, "It's time for you to do this. It's time for you to do that." So, before we can do anything like that – before we can make it successful, our students have to be taught self-motivation and self-control, because those are the only circumstances under which, you know, really good work is going to be done.

HARRIS: Why do you think the students walked out of some of the schools?

JACKSON: There were specific instances at that time. Back in the early 70s, there were still remains – leftover things from sit-ins and marches, all the things that people had their sit-ins and marches for, and all the violence, and I think a lot of that was just a reflection of things that were going on outside the school. There were specific instances in the schools in which somebody thought he had been wronged and where the first thought was not to go to some kind of communication with the people involved. You know, try to – to settle it on – with the people who were involved in the incidences or the administration, or whatever. That was not the first thought. The first thought was to protest. And they were children. They didn't have really good leadership, you know. And an awful lot of instances in the first thought was to walk out, you know. Make a big production of it. Force somebody to say, "I've been wronged" or to give me what I want. And once we decided it that possibly was better to sit down and try to talk about it to somebody, and then, you know, if we couldn't get any results, then protest. I think those kinds of things kind of, you know, phased on out.

HARRIS: Do you think we'll ever return to neighborhood schools?

JACKSON: You know, I do like the idea of neighborhood schools, but I think, possibly, it's a long way off. And I think it's a long way off because of our living patterns now. But, still, for all the integration that has occurred in neighborhoods, there's still a lot of segregation too. If our school – if we're allowed to return to neighborhood schools right now, we're still going to have too many segregated schools. And I think regardless of what your intentions are, if you are segregated within a situation, you lose some, you know, their – the idea is for us to learn to interact with people of all different backgrounds, to learn to live with life as it is. I don't think you can do that in – in a segregated situation. There's too many things you don't know about.

HARRIS: Okay. Thank you.

[Off record]

HARRIS: This is Rebecca Harris and I suggest that when these tapes are evaluated, it should be taken into consideration that Dr. Fortenberry is white and Mrs. Jackson is black. Thank you.

END OF RECORDING

INDEX